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## **Symbolic Practices of Legitimation: Exploring Domestic Motives of North Korea's Space Programme**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Despite international sanctions and a strained economy, North Korea continues to spend scarce resources on a costly space programme. Hitherto, research has usually explained this continuity in terms of international security and/or international reputation. Accordingly, Pyongyang uses its space-related efforts as a pretext to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles and to enhance its international reputation. This article argues that these explanations do not suffice, and thus adds domestic motives for consideration. By engaging recent North Korea studies, which emphasise the importance of performance and symbol for the politics of the Kim regime, this article explores recurring actions and routinised behaviour by the leadership as symbolic practices that reinforce domestic legitimacy. The goal is to provide a conceptual avenue through which to better understand North Korean affairs. Taking into account domestic factors also has, as will be shown, practical policy implications for those negotiating with the regime over its space programme.*

**Keywords:** North Korea; space programme; legitimacy; symbolic practices; security

## **1. Introduction**

The series of recent satellite launches of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter DPRK or North Korea) have shown that the regime spends large amounts of its scarce financial resources on a space programme that is economically risky, technologically challenging and internationally condemned.<sup>1</sup> This gives rise to the following question: Why does the regime continue to pursue an expensive space programme despite the high both financial and political costs of it? This article does not try to tackle the original motives behind the inception of the DPRK space programme but asks why the country remains committed to developing launch and satellite capabilities while also touting their peaceful purpose. This distinction is in particular important with regard to any potential future engagement with the DPRK over its rocket programme.

Two prominent explanations for the continuation of North Korea's space programme take on an international relations perspective in outlining their respective arguments. On the one hand, the satellite programme and space-related activities are seen as a front for the regime's intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) programme designed to increase national security (but which simultaneously endangers international security). On the other, it is assumed that North Korea intends to boost its international status and prestige by way of having independent space launch capabilities. Both approaches neglect, however, domestic factors, which hinders more detailed consideration being made of potentially relevant alternative motives. While we certainly do not deny that security plays an essential role in North Korea's space programme, it nevertheless does not represent the whole picture. The article thus argues

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<sup>1</sup> See especially UNSC resolutions 1695 (2006), 1718 (2006), 1874 (2009), 2087 (2013) and 2270 (2016).

that the regime also utilises its space programme to increase its domestic legitimacy through specific symbolic practices of legitimation.

For this purpose, Section 2 revisits current academic debates about North Korea's space programme and explicates in further detail why domestic considerations should be taken into account when explaining the program's continued existence. It is argued that, in short, the space programme is symbolically linked to the legitimacy of North Korea's ruling class. With this in mind, Section 3 engages with discussions of the concept of legitimacy, in particular with regard to its symbolic dimension in the North Korean context, and lays out the analytical framework of the article. This section will also address the research practicalities of relevance in the study of North Korea. Sections 4 and 5 provide an empirical discussion of the question of how the North Korean regime uses the space programme to give legitimacy to its rule. Section 4 explores individual examples and patterns of the everyday dimension of the space programme, concentrating on the regime's relationship to its citizens. Section 5 construes North Korea's satellite launches as ritualised performances of state legitimation. The final section concludes the article, and situates the findings in the larger academic and policy contexts.

## **2. The Politics of North Korea's Space Programme**

When looking at North Korea's major technological developments – including its space technology – the debate often leans towards prioritising an international angle. The first such angle takes a view from an international security standpoint. Many North Korea scholars follow the prominent assessment of the UNSC, which depicts the space programme as a front for the development of ballistic missiles (e.g. Roy, 2015, 56; Fifield, 2016; Park, 2016). As a

matter of fact, it is quite rare to find research done exclusively on North Korea's space programme per se. Rather, space-related activities are only casually mentioned in passing or as part of the country's ballistic missile or nuclear programmes (e.g. Habib, 2011; Hamisevicz, 2015; for exceptions see Pinkston, 2006; Pace, 2012). In addition to the security angle, the second point of view on North Korea's space programme states that the DPRK is seeking international prestige akin to how the major powers themselves were in the 1960s (e.g. Rubin, 2014; Szalontai in Byrne, 2015; Holtz, 2016). More generally, investments in space launch capabilities are believed to be often fuelled by the striving for international standing (Deudney, 1982; McDougall, 1985) – as the signalling of one's own prominent status to other countries (Early, 2014, 56).

Although other space programmes in Asia are partly driven by prestige (Moltz, 2011, 31), the gaining of international status through an independent space programme is highly questionable in the case of North Korea considering the international outcry that follows each of its SLV launches. These include the tightening of UN sanctions, the expressing of international criticism and the preparing of countermeasures – which are even supported by North Korea's closest ally, China. The security interpretation is thus more persuasive than the international status one.<sup>2</sup> However, it reveals a mainly neorealist reading of North Korea's space programme that emphasises external security, military power and deterrence as driving forces. Moreover, it is biased towards a point of view that addresses mainly US–DPRK relations.

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<sup>2</sup> The actual benefits of North Korea's space program for its ICBM development are still unsettled (Beal, 2016; Mistry and Gopalaswamy, 2012; Schilling, 2016).

While the positions outlined above emphasise an international dimension to North Korea's space programme – by considering it either as a threat to international security or a matter of international reputation – they do not take into account domestic motives when highlighting its continuity. In other words, current studies neglect domestic factors such as legitimacy and regime stability in explaining the leadership's clinging on to its space programme. Some North Korea observers, though, have indeed hinted at the value of the space programme for domestic legitimisation purposes (e.g. Cha, 2012; Graham, 2012; Pesek, 2012; Noland and Haggard, 2013; Frank, 2016;). Victor Cha for instance, in a December 2012 interview with the Center for Strategic and International Studies shortly after North Korea launched a satellite, pointed out that the successful launch would likely help North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to build up his 'domestic credibility'. William Pesek (2012) understands the launch as a way to 'consolidate power' at home, while Euan Graham (2012) suggests that the satellite programme is a means by which to secure regime legitimacy. However, rather than exploring in more detail how the space programme matters to domestic legitimacy, these authors seem ultimately to merely mention it only in passing as part of broader considerations.

A more detailed and structured investigation of the legitimisation strategies of the North Korean leadership concerning its space programme is still missing.<sup>3</sup> Similar to Benjamin Habib's (2011) insightful study about the role of North Korea's nuclear weapons programme in the maintenance of the country's 'military-first' policy, we argue that the space programme has become crucial to legitimising the domestic rule of the Kim leadership. Therefore, making sense of North Korea's space programme in terms of international security and/or reputation, like the abovementioned studies do, does not suffice. Putting focus on domestic legitimacy

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<sup>3</sup> Studies on domestic motives behind technology projects discuss e.g. Stalin's push for world records in aviation (Bailes, 1976) or the Chinese space programme (Sheehan, 2013).

will, hence, contribute to a better understanding of North Korean affairs, and help answer the question of why the North Korean leadership remains committed to its space programme despite the high security and prestige costs that are attached to it. Instead of merely stating the relevance of domestic factors this article, based on novel approaches to the study of North Korean politics, explores new conceptual avenues – specifically, symbolic practices – in order to show how they fundamentally matter to the continuation and advancement of the North Korean space programme.

For this, the recent contributions to the literature that have highlighted the importance to North Korean statecraft of performance and symbolic practices – from the recurring act of attaching pins of North Korean leaders on lapels on an individual level to ritualised and routinised appearances of thousands of people during ceremonial occasions on a collective one – will serve as the analytical basis for the subsequent parts of this article. For example, in a pioneering work on the role of symbols and rituals for political practice in North Korea, Carol Medlicott (2005) identifies two areas that are central to the claiming of power and authority by the North Korean state. By analysing the symbolic interaction with foreign leaders as well as exploring the ritual of so-called ‘on-the-spot guidance visits’, Medlicott shows how the production of North Korean sovereignty relies heavily on these performative practices. Heonik Kwon and Byung-ho Chung (2012), meanwhile, examine the continuity and succession of leadership in North Korea. Both show how Kim Jong-il, successor to his father Kim Il-sung, created conditions of leadership transition, for instance through the promotion of revolutionary art – which facilitated the continuity of charismatic politics in North Korea. Kwon and Chung (2012) argue – referencing Clifford Geertz (1980) – that North Korea has become what they call a ‘theatre state’, and thus a political entity directed towards symbolic

and theatrical means in the display of power and authority. Similarly, Suk-young Kim (2010) studies the theatrical nature of everyday life in North Korea. Turning to theatre, film and everyday performance as analytical sites, Kim argues that theatrical self-presentation is not only a means of entertaining North Korean society but is indeed also essential for its very organisation and mobilisation (see also, Ryang, 2012).

What follows is that, if as suggested by this scholarship, symbolic politics are important for understanding North Korean affairs then the conceptual sites of where these politics take place – or, for that matter, are performed – become likewise important for current studies on North Korea in general, and on its space programme in particular. Conceptualising North Korea's space programme from a domestic legitimisation point of view also has policy implications for any engagement with North Korea over its space and rocket policies. For example, if the space programme is mainly driven by security considerations then giving assurances, trust-building exercises and working towards neutralising common threat perceptions would be a reasonable strategy by which to convince Pyongyang to abandon the programme altogether (cf. Habib, 2011). However, if the regime attributes a legitimisation function to its space programme then its success increases domestic stability and assists it in staying in power; in such a case, it becomes clear that a different, more nuanced policy approach is then required.

### **3. Exploring Symbolic Practices of Legitimation in North Korea**

Research on socialist bureaucracies (e.g. Skinner and Winckler, 1969; Verdery, 1991) and more recently on autocracies (e.g. Kailitz, 2013; Gerschewski, 2013) has identified analogous strategies of regime stability. These are: material incentives or co-optation, coercion or



repression, as well as legitimation or normative and symbolic ideological appeals. Studying the legitimation processes underpinning North Korea's space programme assumes that nation-states require a constant re-enactment and reproduction of the incumbent leadership's claim to power (Weber, 1998; Cho, 2011). To this end, this article employs a concept of legitimation that defines it as the 'process of gaining support which is based on an empirical, Weberian tradition of "legitimacy belief"' (Gerschewski 2013, 18). While there certainly is a significant level of repression and co-optation inherent in the North Korean regime's efforts to stay in power, other studies have pointed to the necessity of even autocracies ultimately relying on legitimation because of the high costs of repression (Svolik, 2012; Grauvogel and von Soest, 2014). Put differently, even though North Korean leaders from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un have stayed squarely in power for decades, in the process seemingly limiting their accountability to the public at large, they have nevertheless still embedded their political projects in strategies of legitimation throughout their periods of rule. In short, despite widespread structures of coercion and oppression, North Korean politics is in the final reckoning also based on legitimacy belief.

Moreover, and in reference to Easton (1979), there is a distinction to be made between specific and diffuse support for a regime. While the former addresses the socio-economic performance of the leadership in terms of economic welfare and physical security, the latter focuses on long-term efforts rooted in ideological, religious and/or nationalistic claims, in the leader's charisma or in external threats (cf. Gerschewski, 2013, 20). The notion of diffuse support links up with other findings in current research that legitimacy claims are relevant for autocratic regimes – in particular with regard to foreign criticism, as outside interference can be used by regimes 'to their advantage as symbols in the struggle for legitimation' (Grauvogel

and von Soest, 2014, 635). Susan Allen (2005) and Rüdiger Frank (2009, 2016) argue in a similar fashion, contending that external pressure and comprehensive sanctions can produce a siege mentality and trigger a rally-round-the-flag effect in support of the regime. The latter proves to be particularly effective when the regime perceives itself to have been (falsely) accused of wrongdoing by foreign actors with whom it only has weak or hostile connections (Roehrig, 2011, 211; Grauvogel and von Soest, 2014, 647).

However, the actual measurement of diffuse regime legitimation is complicated by two specific problems. First, it is difficult to conduct fieldwork, scientific surveys or interviews in North Korea, endeavours that would allow for the collection of primary data. Second, practical problems arise from the definition of legitimation – in that it is difficult to accurately assess the belief in legitimacy among a given population. It should be kept in mind that this limitation does not only apply to the case of North Korea. For the purpose of reaching indicators or approximations of diffuse regime support in autocracies, three conceivable strategies can be identified (cf. Gerschewski, 2013, 20–21): assessing the number and intensity of protests made against the leadership, referring to expert surveys that evaluate regime legitimacy and analysing the regime’s own legitimacy claims.

Adducing the number of protests in North Korea as a sign of disapproval or as a proof of limited regime legitimacy involves fundamental difficulties. Not only can researchers barely identify and analyse displays of public unrest there, but there are also in any case obstacles to the North Korean people actually staging demonstrations due to the regime’s ongoing vigorous political repression of dissent. Likewise, drawing on expert surveys to assess the legitimacy of the North Korean regime simply exports the problems with measurement to a third party and leaves methodological questions still unanswered. Therefore, we pursue a

research strategy here that is based on the above-mentioned assumption that the North Korean leadership has to continuously reproduce its authority because, as others have argued elsewhere (Weber, 1998), states are not pre-given entities, but need to be performatively enacted – wherein performances and symbolic practices on both an individual and collective level are of the utmost importance. In this vein, we situate the analysis in the context of North Korea's space programme so as to focus on certain particular symbolic practices drawn upon as means of regime legitimisation. For this we trace, in the following sections, how references to the space programme resonate in everyday life in North Korea (Section 4), alongside conceiving of the routinised launches of North Korean SLVs as themselves ritualised performances of state legitimisation (Section 5).

As mentioned above, a focus on symbolic practices in the study of North Korea comes with certain difficulties as access to the country is limited. Ryang (2012) proposes an ethnographic approach that draws on texts, historiography, arts, culture and regime propaganda. Accordingly, legitimisation practices or symbolic ideological appeals can be identified in photographs, art, official speeches and in the reports of the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), North Korea's official news service. Additionally, Kwon (2010, 10) emphasises the relevance of theatrical and performative practices within the political communication occurring in North Korea. Public events such as the Arirang Festival address a wider audience than popular literature does, and therefore play a significant role in domestic political processes. As such, the importance of symbolic practices in the analysis of regime legitimisation can hardly be overstated.

Moreover, an ex-ante distinction into two audiences – one domestic, the other international – for symbolic practices of legitimisation is deemed difficult and problematic, as these practices

perform the regime's legitimacy to both the outside world as well as to local constituents simultaneously, though in different ways (cf. Medlicott, 2005, 71; see also Rich 2014). Symbolic performances of legitimation comprise, for instance, the embedding of national myths and symbols into the daily life of North Korean citizens, charging technical devices with nationalist sentiments, everyday practices in school education, infusing patriotic meaning into everyday objects and pop culture as well as ensuring the association of the Kim dynasty with particular policies.

The following sections thus seek to answer the question of how the North Korean leadership utilises its space programme to legitimate and stabilise its rule, through both symbolic performances in everyday life and through (international criticism of) the launch of SLVs themselves. For this the article not only takes into account statements published in state-controlled media both before and after the launches, as space-related media activity peaks during such moments (cf. Byrne, 2015), but also examines academic literature, official UN documents as well as elements of North Korean popular culture. Moreover, the article investigates the sequence of events with respect to the imposition of UN sanctions and related foreign media reports so as to source symbolic actions and practices, which, as mentioned above, play an important role in North Korea's political culture (Medlicott, 2005, 70-71). The empirical material will be limited to only those launches that attempted to send a satellite into orbit. These include the launches under the *Paektusan* and *Unha* rocket programmes, ranging in occurrence from 1998 to 2016.

#### **4. Technological Legitimation: Everyday Symbolic Practices in North Korea**

Considering the significant financial investment, inherent technical difficulties and risk of failure involved in launching satellites (Foust, 2010, 175-176),<sup>4</sup> the North Korean regime evidently uses its independent space programme to signal its capability to master some of the most complex technological challenges conceivable. Accordingly, the DPRK has emphasised each time that its rocket and satellite technologies were produced indigenously and in spite of UN sanctions, and thus with only its ‘own wisdom’ and without international cooperation (KCNA, 2009a, 2012a, 2012b; Ja, 2016). In doing so, the regime can put itself on an equal footing with major global powers in the eyes of its citizens.

The value of the space programme for domestic regime legitimation can also be seen in the close connection of the ruling elite to all of its constituent processes. Kim Jong-un as well as his two predecessors are more than the DPRK’s political leaders, being also symbols of national unity and objects of admiration (Cumings, 2013). The media has often praised the leaders’ dedication to the Korean people and near infallibility, which is why a direct association with certain high-value projects is of great significance. This is observable in frequent and varied symbolic practices related to the space programme itself. In 2009 Kim Jong-il reportedly watched the launch of satellite *Kwangmyongsong-2* in the company of members of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers Party (KWP) (KCNA, 2009a).<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, even after Kim Jong-il’s death he and founder Kim Il-sung were still invoked by the country’s propaganda apparatus to establish direct links between technological success

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<sup>4</sup> This is also illustrated by the fact that only a very limited number of countries have the capability to launch a spacecraft into orbit. These countries include China, France, India, Iran, Israel, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, the United States.

<sup>5</sup> In any case mentions of the military are strikingly absent in the domestic media reports on the DPRK’s satellite launches, see below.

and the dynastic ruling elite (KCNA, 2012c). Often the launches are scheduled to coincide with important national holidays, signalling the symbolic link between the space programme and the Kim leadership. The date of the April 2012 satellite launch corresponded with the 100th birthday of Kim Il-sung, 15 April, which is also known as the Day of the Sun in North Korea. Similarly, the launch conducted four years later was scheduled right before the Day of the Shining Star, Kim Jong-il's birthday, and was also reported to be the gift of the space scientists to the current leader Kim Jong-un (KCNA, 2016c).

In order to further reinforce the connection between the regime's leadership and the national space programme, Kim Jong-un is portrayed as firmly in charge of the decisions taken with regard to satellites. In an attempt to cement further his leadership, he personally authorised the launches with handwritten signatures that were later presented on national television (KCNA, 2016b). For the same purpose, he is regularly brought into direct connection with the satellite programme in news reports as well with the help of photographs that show him in the satellite control centre overseeing the launch itself (KCNA, 2012a, 2015a). In this respect, it is telling that the announcement of the failure of the April 2012 SLV launch on television and on KCNA made no mention of the leadership – merely reporting instead that technicians were currently looking into the matter. Successful launches, on the other hand, are again construed as the direct result of Kim Jong-un's courage, wisdom and leadership.

The space programme is, in addition, highly charged with nationalistic overtones, symbols and with references to the Kim dynasty. The first SLV was named *Paektusan*, or Mount Paektu, and thereby its very name creates a strong linkage to the nation's mythical origins – as the mountain is presented as the birthplace of Korea's mythical founder *Tangun* in 2333 BC.

Moreover, Mount Paektu alludes to the ‘heroic liberation efforts’ of Kim Il-sung – because, according to the North Korean historical narrative, this was the location of his partisan struggle against the Japanese as well as the birthplace of his son Kim Jong-il (Cumings, 1997; Pinkston, 2003; Byman and Lind, 2010; Frank, 2014b). The satellites themselves are variously characterised as either national symbols of strength or of technological prowess, having been brought about by the great leaders (KCNA, 2016d).

In the case of the 2016 launch of the *Kwangmyongsong-4* satellite, the domestic media ran frequent reports on how the contributors – meaning the space scientists and technicians involved – were celebrated and rewarded. They were invited to the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun where Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il sit in state (KCNA, 2016e), toured the Kimjongilia Festival on the leader’s birthday in February (KCNA, 2016f) and attended a performance by the popular Moranbong Band (KCNA, 2016g). Apart from the arranged festivities for those involved in the space programme, in the aftermath of satellite launches the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) regularly reports of the great emotion and national pride North Koreans’ are feeling as a result of it – and large celebratory events are held (KCNA, 2012a, 2012d; see also, Pinkston, 2003, 60). In this way, the regime addresses the people’s nationalist sentiments in order to evoke pride and support for the ruling regime that made possible such technological achievements in the first place.

Science and technology projects have become a central part of the regime’s strategy to solve various problems of national security, legitimacy and the uncertain domestic food situation (Jensen, 2009). With an eye on the dire economic outlook of the country, the government also frames its space programme as a symbol of development and an important driver to bringing about subsequent economic growth. The regime lauds space technology as

useful for agricultural forecasting and planning, and generally deems it sound policy ‘because its ripple effects through the economy bring “eightfold” benefits’ according to the vice-chief of the space agency’s research institute, Yun Chang Hyok (The Guardian, 2015).

Economic benefits are a consistent feature of the North Korean space programme, similar to the arguments put forward by a member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – who characterises the space sector as a high-profit industry where a ‘\$1 investment [...] can lead to the profit of \$7–12 in returns’ (C. M. Kim, 2016). It is reported that the government has constantly invested in the further development of satellites as indispensable assets for the country’s economic development (KCNA, 2012a) and for the improvement of the people’s living standard (KCNA, 2012d; C. M. Kim, 2016). Particularly, an increase in North Koreans’ material conditions and economic status has been an early strategic focus in the rule of Kim Jong-un (Frank, 2015, 2012b). The message is that the leadership is taking care of its people, in that it increases the scientific and technological foundations of the economy through space development – a domain mastered only by very few countries hitherto.

In addition to the direct financial benefits proclaimed by the regime, the space programme is also depicted as being a farsighted economic policy that keeps up with international trends. Space development is seen as a core requirement for any modern country, and has become a global trend that has expanded its applications beyond a handful of developed nations to become by now a common feature in national economic and scientific projects (KCNA, 2016i; C. M. Kim, 2016). While this depiction can be interpreted as a proof of the ruling elite’s ability to lead its country into a bright economic future of a global standard, it also attempts to normalise the development of satellite technology on a global scale. This is important because the DPRK sees itself as treated unfairly and subjected to double standards,



in that, in contrast to other nations, only its own satellite programme is the target of international criticism and sanctions – a theme we pick up on below in more detail.

Further, the space programme of the DPRK is highly present in the media and within artefacts of popular culture – being thereby accessible and commonplace for a broader audience of North Korean citizens. The theme of the space programme features in paintings, public places and amusement parks. As hinted at above, one of the most popular music groups, the Moranbong Band, played at a banquet held for scientists and technicians involved in the space programme (this event was also aired on national TV). Additionally, symbols of the space programme are incorporated into North Korean daily life. For instance, the launch of the satellite featured in the 2012 Arirang Mass Games held in Pyongyang. The large-scale display of gymnastics and dance performances in a stadium is accompanied by a vast number of symbolic references to the country's leadership, achievements and history, which allow glimpses into the North Korean system (Frank, 2013).

Moreover, the regime has regularly issued postage stamps to commemorate the different satellite launches. This includes the 1998 launch as well, which was celebrated as a great success in spite of the so-called 'Arduous March' – the official terminology for the North Korean famine of the 1990s. The most recent stamps related to the space programme depict the *Kwangmyongsong-4* satellite as well as Kim Jong-un during an on-the-spot guidance visit to the launch site (Williams, 2012b; KCNA, 2016h). At the same time, the *Unha* rocket has become a regular sight in everyday domestic life and art. It features in paintings conveying the message that the prestige and glory of North Korea will only become greater through the

continued success of its space programme,<sup>6</sup> and models of the rocket are, among other things, integrated into playgrounds and children's carousels (Tagesanzeiger, 2015) – so that the youngest citizens are already brought in contact with the North Korean space programme. Similarly, the *Unha* SLVs are embedded into the everyday world of North Koreans – when they are displayed during floral exhibitions in Pyongyang surrounded by Kimilsungia and Kimjongilia respectively, which North Koreans easily identify as the symbols of their late leaders (e.g. Herman, 2016). Thereby, again, the strong association of the leadership with the country's space programme is reinforced.

The North Korean media addresses various aspects of the space programme in an effort to increase regime support and as part of a process that tentatively could be called 'technological regime legitimization' (cf. Bailes, 1976). An analysis of pre- and post-launch media publications shows that the regime emphasises the technical complexity the country was able to master on its own when joining the exclusive club of nations with its independently developed satellite launch capabilities. By openly linking this technological achievement with the Kim dynasty, the regime further highlights the capability and foresight of the ruling elite in taking care of its population. This is reinforced with a promise of the increasing economic gains to be expected as a direct effect of the satellite launches. Moreover, it was shown that the space programme is symbolically charged with references to the DPRK's nationalist ideology – while the *Unha* rocket itself has become a part of domestic popular culture and a common sight in civilian daily life. Admittedly a more diffuse and implicit strategy than co-optation or repression, technological regime legitimization via the space programme is

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<sup>6</sup> 'The Kim Utopia – Exhibition of Paintings from North Korea', 3 April to 30 August 2015, Drents Museum Assen, Netherlands. For a more extensive discussion of North Korean art, see Frank (2012a).

nonetheless an important piece of the government's attempt to stir up nationalistic sentiments for the purpose of political stability. In short, there is more to each North Korean space rocket launched than its mere technical components. Each embodies the legitimization of rule, the technological capability of the Kim leadership and also the country's (perceived) economic prowess.

### **5. Standing Up to International Pressure: Legitimacy and International Criticism**

As mentioned in Section 2, if symbolic politics are important for understanding North Korea's actions then the conceptual sites of where these politics are performed become likewise important for current analyses of North Korea. Important such sites include UN sanctions in the ritualised performance of satellite launches and references to international law made by the ruling regime.

In this respect, it is worthwhile to note that the Outer Space Treaty, which the DPRK signed up to in 2009, grants the legal right to explore and use 'outer space, including the Moon and other celestial bodies ... [to] all States without discrimination of any kind, on a basis of equality and in accordance with international law' (UNOOSA, 2013). Since the test firing of a series of missiles in 2006, however, which also included a *Taepodong-2*, the UNSC has banned North Korea from launching any ballistic missile with Resolution 1695. It was not immediately clear whether this also included the peaceful launch of satellites (Schwoch, 2012, 285-286), as it generally targeted ballistic missile technology and did not explicitly mention satellite launches. Only the 2016 resolution included a provision that 'prohibits the DPRK from engaging in any form of technical cooperation with other Member States on launches using ballistic missile technology, *even if characterized as a satellite launch or space launch*

*vehicle*' (UNSC, 2016, italics added for emphasis). Nevertheless, the council has repeatedly reaffirmed the ban on ballistic missile launches in direct response to North Korea's satellite ones too, arguing that they fall under the very same moratorium.

With this in mind, it is argued that the North Korean regime stages a specific symbolic performance in the operation of its space programme. In that respect the repeated SLV launches can be understood as symbolic practices themselves, as emblematic actions meant to increase domestic legitimacy. With the regime constantly portraying its satellite programme as peaceful and within the boundaries of international law, it lays the ground for the framing of international criticism and sanctions as false, unjust and illegitimate. This results in the image being created of a leadership that stands firmly up to international pressure. While the rally-round-the-flag effect is arguably not the main motive behind the rocket launches, it is still used by the leadership to further legitimise its rule.

The regime rarely misses a chance, especially in its pre-launch announcements, to assure the watching audience that its space programme is being developed solely for peaceful purposes (KCNA, 2009a, 2012a, 2012b). Accordingly the DPRK insists on the legitimate right of all states to undertake such activities, as laid out in the Outer Space Treaty (C. M. Kim, 2016). In an effort to emphasise the peaceful character of the space programme, North Korea has undertaken a variety of different measures in the past: For both 2012 SLV launches it explicitly stated that it had calculated the flight path of the rockets in such a way that neighbouring countries were not going to be affected by debris. Furthermore, a close reading of the state-run media gives the impression that it is not the military but the KWP that is in charge of the operation of the space programme. Kim Jong-un is regularly accompanied by party members during his visits to the satellite launch sites, while the programme's successful

development is rather attributed to the KWP's policy focus on science and technology than to defence purposes (e.g. KCNA, 2016c). This strict detachment of the space programme from the military is aimed at reinforcing the perception of its peaceful nature. So the regime purports that – despite UN sanctions – its space development programme is peaceful and, therefore, the legitimate right of the DPRK.

Legitimacy was also the central factor in the country's recent founding of the so-called National Aerospace Development Administration in 2014 (Berger, 2014). While some news commentators ridiculed the logo of North Korea's new space agency, suggesting that it strikingly resembles that of the US' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) (e.g. Cheng, 2014; Walker, 2014), Andrea Berger (2014) points out that the refashioning of the administrative structures of the space programme signals the continued commitment to it at the highest political levels. As she put it, 'by modelling NADA's image on its arch enemy's [NASA], North Korea is simultaneously making an appeal for legitimacy and criticizing perceived double standards'(2014).

Moreover, North Korea goes to great lengths to remain within international regulations in the operation of its space and satellite programme. In preparation of its past four launches, KCNA announced that the country would adhere to international law and ensure transparency. To some degree the government turned rhetoric into action when it notified both the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) about the upcoming launches, as is good practice, and even registered its first satellite in orbit with the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs (Harvey et al., 2010, 471; Williams, 2012a, 2016). The regime has also made sure to emphasise its appreciation of international rules, as it not only acceded to the Outer Space Treaty and the Convention on the Registration

of Objects Launched into Outer Space but also announced, after the 2016 launch, that it had signed additional space-related agreements – such as the Agreement on the Rescue of Astronauts, the Return of Astronauts and the Return of Objects Launched into Outer Space as well as the Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Objects (C. M. Kim, 2016). This symbolic embracing of international law serves to further legitimise its space programme and to refute any subsequent international criticism. In fact, the country frequently makes direct references to the Outer Space Treaty in official statements and claims to be in full compliance with its regulations. In contrast, the UNSC is presented as overriding international law by issuing a ban on peaceful satellite launches by the DPRK.

Whenever the UN sanctions in response to previous rocket launches are addressed in the state-run media, their authority and legality is strongly denounced. North Korea does not recognise the UNSC resolutions issued against it, because they are seen as the work of ‘hostile forces’ and do not contain an explicit ban on satellite launches (KCNA, 2012e). In 2016, the DPRK took an official route inside the UN system to request legal clarification of the sanction regime from then UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon. Citing various international agreements, the statement questions the legal grounds of the ban on satellite launches – and ‘in case of no convincing legal clarification is given on the above questions, it will be concluded that the UN Security Council has gone beyond powers, lost impartiality [...] and committed an act of double standard’ (KCNA, 2016j; see also, Ja, 2016; The Straits Times, 2016). In essence, the DPRK accepts certain elements of international law with regard to its outer space programme. Accordingly, it invokes the Outer Space Treaty when it asserts that the right to use outer space is universally recognised by the international community – thereby suggesting that the UNSC has no say in the matter (KCNA, 2012d).

As has been shown, North Korea argues on normative and legal grounds that its space programme does not violate international standards. At the same time, it anticipates international criticism when it prepares for another launch. Against this backdrop, the leadership takes measures to preempt criticism and lay the ground for its response. For instance, prior to its April 2012 launch, the KCNA already ran media reports claiming North Korea's legitimate right to launch a satellite. It also attacked the South Korean government for criticising the upcoming launch (KCNA, 2012f, 2012g). Additionally, the regime even invited foreign media outlets to the Sohae satellite launch site to observe. Based on this narrative of a peaceful space programme, the DPRK criticises the US for acting above international law in unilaterally determining which satellite launches are illegal (C. M. Kim, 2016). In this respect, it accuses the US of double standards because only North Korean satellite launches are regarded as de facto ICBMs – while other countries are allowed to pursue space development in an unobstructed manner. In an ironic comment on US criticism, the KCNA asked whether 'the US or Japan lift[ed] their satellites with puffs of breath or with magic strength?' (2012h).

The reaction to international criticism and sanctions following SLV launches reveals a strong similarity to how the space programme is portrayed as peaceful and legal:

The satellite launch was the exercise of an independent right pertaining to the DPRK as well as its legitimate sovereignty recognized by international law. *Therefore*, the U.S. and those countries which launched satellites before have neither justification nor reason to find fault with the DPRK's satellite launch (KCNA, 2013a, italics added for emphasis).

Thus the state-run media cites an antagonistic international environment that is attacking the DPRK for sinister reasons, and depicts the US as overreacting to a peaceful satellite launch (KCNA, 2012d, 2013a). In this vein, North Korea victimises itself as the target of what

it calls ‘unjust and ill-tempered hostile forces [that] have worked hard to mislead public opinion with groundless assertions and sophism’ (KCNA, 2012e). In this line of thinking, the UN system, too, has fallen victim to the arbitrary exercise of power by the US and ‘other big powers’, meaning that it is only just to reject the UN resolutions as illegal (Ja, 2016). The aggressive and nationalistic tone adopted suggest that the Kim regime is merely using foreign interference as a pretext to rounding up domestic support and legitimating its rule (Kim, 2015, 13).

Following this line of argumentation of being falsely accused by international actors arguably strengthens nationalistic sentiments and increases the impact of the rally-round-the-flag effect. More concretely, the sanctions imposed and critical statements made by other countries regarding the satellite programme are framed as an external intrusion amounting to an infringement upon the DPRK’s sovereignty (KCNA, 2013a, 2013b; Ja, 2016; C. M. Kim, 2016). Consequently, the country faces a hostile international environment that denies it fundamental rights – to the extent that ‘unwillingness to recognize our satellite launch precisely means the unwillingness to recognize us as the sovereign state’ (C. M. Kim, 2016). Put simply, the leadership directly links the international rejection of its satellite programme to the denial of its right to even exist. This serves as the ideal pretext for the regime to deliver its message of standing up to an international community that attempts to interfere with domestic affairs. The issue, hence, becomes a battle for defending North Korea’s very sovereignty. In this sense, the satellite launch is presented as a symbol of resistance in the struggle against illegitimate criticism from hostile forces – as it proves ‘no force on earth can prevent the DPRK from exercising the right to use space for peaceful purposes’ (KCNA, 2016d). In direct connection to the legitimacy of the regime it is, furthermore, celebrated as



proving Kim Jong-un's courage in defying the global powers represented by the UNSC (KCNA, 2016a).

In sum, the depiction of an enemy existing that threatens the DPRK's peaceful space programme is used by the regime as an additional source of domestic legitimacy (cf. Burnell, 2006, 549; Kim, 2014, 135). The North Korean leadership is driven by its interest in staying in power and uses the space programme as a symbol of its strength, international resistance and, ultimately, legitimate rule. For the purpose of reinforcing the latter, the regime defies international interference with its space programme so as to stir up nationalist sentiments among its citizens and trigger a rally-round-the-flag effect. In this respect, North Korea's disregard of international sanctions might frustrate other countries and international observers alike. However, the key to better understanding its behaviour with regard to its ongoing space rocket programme is to account for the domestic dimension as one of the programme's central driving factors.

## **6. Conclusion**

Most scholars agree that regime perpetuation is a core imperative in the North Korean government's reasoning and decision making. The national space programme, however, has hitherto largely been investigated from an international security angle that explains its persistence only by way of North Korean concerns over deterrence and external security. This article has argued that this assessment does not sufficiently capture the whole picture, however. Instead, it has offered a different reading that focuses on domestic motives: the DPRK government utilises its space programme to bolster its domestic legitimacy in two interconnected ways. First, as part of what has tentatively been termed 'technological regime

legitimation' (cf. Bailes, 1976), the ruling elite utilises various aspects of the space programme to increase popular political support. Second, the DPRK government firmly stands up to international criticism over its space programme so as to create a rally-round-the-flag effect that further increases domestic regime support.

In essence, then, the main arguments presented here do not contradict with international security readings of North Korea's space programme. However, they aim at including domestic factors in explaining its continuity – by adding in for consideration that there are other relevant audiences besides just the international community. Indeed, external threats are likely to be a major driving force; however, this article has shown that the regime also uses its space programme to hedge against internal discontent. The article, focussing on North Korea's space programme, has examined recurring actions and routinised behaviour by the country's leadership as symbolic practices underpinning domestic legitimacy. While this approach was informed by existing scholarship, which emphasises the importance of performance and symbol in the politics of power of the Kim regime (Medlicott, 2005; S.-Y. Kim, 2010; Kwon and Chung, 2012; Ryang, 2012), it corresponds also with a recent surge of studies in the social sciences on the concept of 'practice' (Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Bueger and Gadinger, 2015). Conceiving of practice as an analytical site for social and political analyses helps scholarship on contemporary Asia and beyond to approach already existing empirical material in a novel way. In the case of North Korea, this comprises, for instance, official publications, political activities on the international stage, domestic media reports as well as arts and popular culture.

Investigating the different motives behind the DPRK's space programme holds also important policy implications. Past policy approaches – including the imposition of sanctions

and the articulation of international criticism – have not led to North Korea giving up its space aspirations. To the contrary, international criticism, as has been shown, is framed by the regime as an attack on national sovereignty and used as a way to increase its own legitimacy. Similarly, security assurances given by the United States and other major powers might be able to address North Korea's fears over external threats. However, the findings of this article suggest that such a strategy disregards the space programme's significant meaning for domestic regime legitimation.

Beyond that, the symbolic significance of the space programme complicates more engagement-oriented strategies. For example, seeking the involvement of commercial manufacturers of carrier rockets or international space cooperation to satisfy North Korea's demands for space development neglects the fact that the regime's legitimacy is also based on its ability to *independently* develop and operate its satellite programme. Finally, as the space programme is synonymous with the legitimacy and sovereignty of the regime, it must be asked whether North Korea – or indeed any other state for that matter – can reasonably be expected to negotiate on what are core values to its people and rulers.

These apparent difficulties warrant serious reflections about the UNSC's (lack of) differentiation between North Korean satellite launches and ICBM development. It also begs the question of how the DPRK's interests in space use might be acknowledged without also compromising on concerns over international security. Therefore, the scope of the policy implications revealed calls for further exploration now of the domestic and international motives behind North Korea's space programme – something which this article has contributed to.

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